

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Philippians 1:1-11 "Grace and Peace"

Earlier this summer, as we were upgrading our church web site - and many thanks to Danielle for doing a fine job with the design - I was trying to decide on a "tag line" to come after "Wading River Congregational Church" - a phrase that would describe who we are and what we believe; "what this church is all about." If you've looked at our web site recently, you know the first words are the simplest Christian creed you find in the New Testament: *Jesus is Lord*. The foundation of Christian discipleship, as Craig said last week in his memorable line is "the visceral understanding that Jesus is Lord, which makes us respond to him in worship."

But it was the second line of our web site that caused me more thought, until I remembered a verse that has stuck with me for years, and is repeated over and over in the New Testament, especially in the opening of the Apostle Paul's letters: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. It's a greeting, it's a blessing, it's a prayer, and it's also a short summary of the whole of Paul's theology. New Testament commentators will tell you that Paul composed this sentence by modifying two everyday greetings of the ancient world: the Greek *charein* and the Hebrew *shalom*, and giving them a very distinctive Christian flavor.

Greetings, in any language, are short-hand versions of a wish for the well-being of the

other person. So Americans say "hi," abbreviating the older British "hello," which in turn was a short form of "health to you." Over time, of course, greetings lose their origins, and so did the 1st century greetings that Paul uses here. So why does he use them; what did they mean to Greeks and Jews, and to Paul the Christian? Scholars think that in part Paul is building bridges between his Jewish and Greek readers by emphasizing one of his favorite themes, *reconciliation*. By picking up both their greetings, *charein* and *shalom*, he is saying "as Christians we are all in this together."

1) Grace

The original meaning of the Greek *charein* was "joy" - so as a greeting it meant "be joyful," "be merry;" similar to the English use of *cheers* (which has the same root). But Paul changes *charein* in a small but important way to *charis* - "grace." Grace means at root "what brings delight;" "that which causes joy." And of course it becomes one of the most basic words in New Testament vocabulary to describe the foundation of Christianity. Grace is what the Gospel is all about - grace understood as *the act of God that brings joy to undeserving people*.

The Christian Gospel is that God, out of his own gracious character, has acted in Jesus Christ in a way that will delight everyone who hears of it, and will bring them into a

place - a state - of joy, and in turn lead them to lives of thanksgiving before God. God has acted to bless all people who will believe, and Paul wants both Jews and Greeks to understand that. So he also invokes the greatest of Old Testament blessings, when Aaron the priest is told by God to pronounce to Israel: "*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace*" (Numbers 6:22-26).

Grace is God's love in action: his steadfast covenant love for his people; his forgiveness, his mercy, his kindness, his goodness; his redeeming, restoring and life-renewing ways; his favor toward the people he has created and preserved. Out of the great character of God comes the great act that is the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Exaltation of Jesus. God has acted to rescue, redeem, and restore his people, and they should be glad - be delighted, be overjoyed! "*Grace to you*" is Paul's short-hand for "*may God's rich and free blessings in and through Jesus rest on your life and fill you with joy.*" God has done great things, be glad!

2) Peace

The Jewish *shalom*, which the New Testament translates as *eirene* - peace - is of course an ancient word of very large meaning. It conveys well-being, living in harmony with God and other people and yourself. *Shalom* is about reconciliation, about wholeness, about health and prosperity. It includes ending hostilities with enemies, and living in safety and security.

In Old Testament times, *shalom* was the result of God's favor to his people Israel: *shalom* was peace with God and with surrounding nations, it was abundant crops and herds and children and long life. In Christian understanding, *peace is the result of*

God's grace: peace is the state you enter when God's grace in Jesus has reached you. Peace with God, reconciliation with other people, inner peace of mind, are the way people experience God's acts of grace.

Paul makes that clear over and over: because Jesus has died for us, because he has risen again by God's power, because he is now exalted to God's right hand, we can *now* experience peace with God, reconciliation to God, being declared just in God's court, the enmity between us done away with. And peace with God, forgiveness, knowing we will never face his judgment or punishment - tho' at times we richly deserve it - our objective state of having been acquitted on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ, can and should mean that we find internal peace of mind, which in turn makes it possible for us to be reconciled with other people, and to work for peace and reconciliation in the world.

So the greeting "*Grace and peace to you*" means "*may God's great act of mercy lead you to a place of joy, and an inner certainty that you can rest in God's favor - which will free you to do great things.*" In a few words, Paul has summarized a great deal of his theology.

3) God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Except of course that Paul has to remind us where this all comes from! Grace, peace, joy, delight, do not come from our strenuous efforts, do not come from our good intentions, do not come from our high moral values, do not come from our social connections, do not come from our political affiliations, do not come from our nationality, our birth, our ethnicity, our wealth, our health. Though we strive mightily to find peace and wholeness by these routes, they don't lead there.

At some level we all know this, but we keep forgetting it. Our peace and joy do not depend on whether Barack Obama or John McCain is elected President of the United States. Our peace and joy do not depend on whether our home's value has dropped by 5% or 25% in the past two years. Our peace and joy do not depend on which college our sons or daughters attend. We can have the finest house on the block, with the most beautiful gardens, and fine new cars in the driveway, but if our son is on drugs or our husband is an alcoholic, none of it means a thing, and we have neither peace nor joy.

The only place we are promised we can find grace and peace; joy and reconciliation, is in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. By the loving initiative of God we are "rescued, healed, restored, forgiven;" through the man Jesus whom his friends quickly called God's champion, his Anointed One, his Messiah, the Christ; and whom they soon - before the middle of the 1st century - called "Lord," as Israel had always called God. Only through the combined love and victorious sacrifice of "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," can we find the grace and peace we desperately need.

4) *Grace and Peace Now*

So if your inner life, your family life, your social life, your work life is in turmoil; if your days are filled with strife and bad feelings; if you deal constantly with people who seem determined to "push your buttons" and make you angry - or if that is what *you are doing* to your spouse, your sons and daughters, your work colleagues - then you know you need to find peace, well-being, wholeness, the *shalom* of God. We all want to "lie down in green pastures and be led beside quiet waters." We know at some level that we will never get there by working harder, spending more, controlling more people; we will not get there by diverting the

pain by food or drink or sports or sex or any other pleasure. If we keep going the way we are going, we will only experience more stress, more anxiety, more conflict; we will become more harried, more competitive; and less and less a pleasure to have around the house or the office.

To find peace within, and with other people, we need first to find the grace of God that is shown in Jesus Christ. *Grace first, peace second.* Experience God's undeserved favor; admit that we all ought to pay for what we have done; ought by now to be disgraced, divorced, or dismissed; but by the great mercies of God we have for years been treated better than we deserve; and all that comes only from the grace that God shows most profoundly in giving his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Only accepting and embracing our Father's gracious provision for us in Jesus can reconcile us to him, and only then can we find peace in our own hearts and begin to make peace with other people.

So, Paul would say, "believe the Gospel," because it spells out how God has acted in Jesus to cover our sin, to offer us forgiveness, to show his grace and favor to us. Once Paul himself had been touched by grace, offering other people the free gospel of the grace of God consumed the rest of his life.

So if you and I want to become more gracious, more graceful, more peaceful, more joyful people - for our benefit, for the blessing of everyone who knows us, and for the glory and pleasure of God - then we must submit to and embrace the grace of God who offers us salvation in Jesus Christ. Only experiencing that grace can lead us into the state of peace that you and I long for.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what this church - what any church - ought to be "all about":

proclaiming by word and deed the gracious acts of God.

Let us pray...